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ABSTRACT

This report presents information to make more visible the advantages of small colleges and to make explicit why small colleges choose to remain small. Nine topics of discussion are as follows: focus on the education of the undergraduate student; providing high quality education to all kinds of students; providing a liberal arts education for a lifetime, one in step with today's world; emphasizing values; providing students with significant opportunities to become involved in activities that foster individual maturation; offering curricula and a teaching environment with important advantages; leadership that can make a difference; financial and administrative efficiency; and engendering enormous commitment from their "families." (SM)

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SMALL BY CHOICE

THE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL COLLEGES

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THE COUNCIL OF INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

A SPECIAL REPORT ON THE ROLE OF SMALL INDEPENDENT COLLEGES IN AMERICA

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FOR MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES small colleges have served America well, making high quality education accessible to the fullest range of students—students who as graduates have gone on to become national leaders in business, government, and the professions.

People often ask: "Why don't small colleges grow larger?"

The answer is simple: Small colleges elect purposefully to remain small because of the advantages smallness brings to the educational process. America's small colleges are not small by default, they are *small by choice*.

In recent years a number of national educational commissions have called for "reforms" in higher education. Many of these so-called reforms—emphasis on the undergraduate student, smaller classes, focus on core liberal arts—have been central attributes of America's small colleges from their beginning.

To make more visible the advantages of small colleges and to make explicit why small colleges choose to remain small, the Council of Independent Colleges is pleased to publish this Special Report, the third of a continuing series whose purpose is to explain the vital role of small colleges in American higher education.

Allen P. Splete
President
The Council of Independent Colleges

Photo by Bill Denison (Courtesy Emory and Henry College)

AMONG THE NATION'S 3,200 colleges and universities, approximately 720 are small, independent institutions. They enroll 3,000 or fewer students, grant the baccalaureate degree, and stress the liberal arts. They are governed by independent boards of trustees, are beholden neither to state nor federal authorities, and are free to act as they see fit.

A simple but compelling historical fact best conveys the value placed upon these institutions: They have prospered in the educational marketplace for more than two centuries by *consciously choosing to remain small*, even though many at numerous times in their history could have elected to grow.

By consciously remaining small, wisely using available resources, and hewing steadfastly to their mission, small colleges have sustained themselves since the earliest times of the Republic. Today, America's small colleges are a vital component in higher education. Small size is a proven success story.

These are the reasons.

Small colleges focus on the education of the undergraduate student.

THIS IS AN ARROW-STRAIGHT MISSION, unencumbered by the demands of faculty research grants and undiffused by a proliferation of public service activities. Teaching comes first. Of course, faculty at small colleges carry out research—much of it distinguished. However, it is research that links directly to the undergraduate instruction program; it is scholarship that feeds the teaching and learning processes. This sharp focus on the undergraduate gives small colleges a beneficial advantage in developing the academic talents of students.

"A combination of forces in American higher education has resulted in the transformation of professors from teachers concerned with their students' characters and minds to professional scholars committed more to their specific disciplines than to teaching or the life of the academic institutions where they hold their appointments. Research and specialization may be what graduate schools are all about, but they are not what undergraduate colleges are about . . ."
—from "Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community," Association of American Colleges, 1985.

Small colleges provide high quality education to all kinds of students.

THE STUDENT BODY AT MOST SMALL COLLEGES is diverse—culturally, racially, spiritually, financially, academically. Small colleges exist to provide a diverse group of students an education of high quality, aimed squarely at preparing all kinds of young people to be fully functioning citizens in the democracy. Small colleges offer an educational experience configured for all students, not merely for the economically, socially, or academically elite.

Small colleges provide a liberal arts education for a lifetime—one in step with today's world.

THE CURRICULUM AT SMALL COLLEGES—historically and now—requires core liberal arts general education courses in combination with pre-professional programs which prepare people for life's work.

As the pace of change quickens, the life span of an education decreases. Only by obtaining an education that is *generic* will individuals be able to remain current. Thus, increasing technological complexity requires not more specialized education but rather more general education—because men and women, individually, must attain the capacity and flexibility to educate themselves for the remainder of their lives. A liberal arts education is not subject to the whim of the moment. It is an education for all time.

Small colleges emphasize values.

THE SHAPING OF VALUES is a consciously stated part of the mission of most small institutions. This stems partly from the religious heritage of many small liberal arts colleges but it is not exclusively their domain. Fostering values—both in the classroom and out—is best done (or perhaps can only be done) in a small-scale, human-sized environment. The shaping of values permeates most small colleges. Small colleges go about the task deliberately—placing love, the common good, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and things humanistic and spiritual above the quest for status, money, and power. Thus, how a person in latter life acts as a citizen, treats a spouse, and selects from among alternatives is a function of that person's values. Positive values are most readily absorbed in an environment where the common good is paramount.

One institution defines values as "the determiners in persons and groups that influence choice and behavior."
—from "Values and the Survival of the Liberal Arts College," Liberal Education, March 1977.

Small colleges provide students with significant opportunities to become involved in activities that foster individual maturation.

MANY STUDIES HAVE SHOWN that students who prosper best in college are those who participate substantially in extracurricular activities. Important learning opportunities exist outside the classroom. Colleges that are small provide more kinds of experiences that stimulate intellectual and social growth and development.

This manifests itself in many ways.

• The geographic compactness of a small college campus increases opportunities for students to meet and interact with fellow students. It enhances important interaction with faculty. When it is possible to assemble every student and every faculty member in one place, the resulting sense of community—a sense of sharing for the common good—is subtle and intangible, yet very real.

• Students enrolled at small colleges have proportionately more opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities than students at large institutions. At most small colleges, it is not uncommon to find 75 percent of all students participating in extracurricular activities. Unquestionably, a greater proportion of students can sit in leadership chairs. This exercise of leadership creates mature and effective graduates.

• In pursuing extracurricular activities, there is a place in small colleges for the amateur—the generalist. In a small college, a young man who does not lift weights and does not aspire to a National Football League career can play varsity football. Equally, a young woman without designs on a career as a physicist can nevertheless jointly write with her professor a journal article for the American Institute of Physics.

If 200 openings are available for students to participate in band and choir at an institution, the odds that a student will participate are 5 to 1 at a college enrolling 1000 students; 100 to 1 at an institution of 20,000; and 200 to 1 at an institution of 40,000 students.

Small colleges offer curricula and a teaching environment with important advantages.

THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS is noticeably different at small colleges.

• Classes are small, affording students more opportunity for personal participation and more interaction with professors. It is difficult to hide in a class of but twelve. There is immediate, real-time feedback from professor to student.

• Students are taught by full-time senior professors, not graduate assistants.

• Small colleges are legendary for teaching *all* students communications skills—writing, public speaking, and newer

literacies involving computers. Frequent classroom participation, possible because of small-sized classes and seminars, fosters (indeed, forces) students to think critically and to express themselves clearly, in full view of professor and peers. Demanding writing assignments are common.

• Innovation in curriculum and teaching occurs more readily at small colleges. Professors, not bound by departmental constraints, find it easier to develop with colleagues new kinds of cross-disciplinary courses of study designed to meet today's needs. For students, custom-tailored curricula are easier to implement, including off-campus internships, foreign study, cooperative work-study programs, faculty-student research projects, and independent study.

Emmanuel College, using Boston as its laboratory, has implemented a program called "The City," taught jointly by an historian and a sociologist, which introduces students to the complex social, legal, logistical, and political ramifications of mounting major construction projects in congested urban areas.

• Interaction with faculty is fostered in a small-scale environment, especially accidental and unplanned interaction. For most students, one or two faculty members become role models, mentors of enormous influence who oftentimes become lifelong friends and colleagues. The curmudgeonly economics professor (whose 8 o'clock class is always filled) is, in his own special way, a charismatic figure to students, challenging them intellectually and forcing them to exceed even their own expectations. Similarly, the English professor who ruthlessly critiques student manuscripts is likely to be the kind of professor who emerges as a model of great influence.

At small colleges, leadership can make a difference.

SMALL COLLEGES, unencumbered by bureaucracy and having fewer administrative obstacles, can readily adapt to change. People can exchange information quickly. Decisions can be made swiftly. Innovations can be implemented rapidly. In this environment, a single individual—an imaginative president, for example—can wield significant influence over an institution. It is far more difficult to alter the course of larger institutions. Presidents of small colleges are like sailors of a single ship, tacking this way and that, catching the winds of opportunity, trying to round the buoy first—and safely. At small institutions leadership has a real chance to function.

In *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman conclude similarly about industry: "The economic theorists may disagree, but to the excellent companies the evidence is crystal clear—smallness is both effective and efficient. Smallness induces manageability and, above all, commitment. Small works. Small is beautiful."

Small colleges are financially and administratively efficient.

A COMMON MYTH suggests that small colleges—supposedly lacking economies of scale—are by definition less efficient than larger institutions. This is false. In a detailed economic analysis of institutions enrolling fewer than 1000 students, an American Council on Education study failed to find data to support this contention: "The decision of the most appropriate size for a liberal arts college should *not* be made on economic or financial grounds."

"The pessimism that small colleges are doomed to failure because of the burden of a large block of fixed costs is unwarranted," reports an American Council on Education study.

Small colleges engender enormous commitment from their "families."

SOMETHING SPECIAL happens to people involved with small colleges.

- Alumni loyalty is fierce. Homecomings are important, contact throughout one's lifetime is common, annual giving levels are high.
- Parents together with students become engaged in the institution's life.
- A disproportionate share of alumni sons and daughters attend alma mater.
- Faculty maintain a commitment to the *college* first rather than to *department* or *discipline*.
- Boards of trustees, presidents, and other administrators—faced with the challenges of leading the institution in the face of unceasing difficulties—say almost in a common voice that the ideals and purposes of their institution are so vital, important, and necessary that they will do anything to preserve it, to protect it, to enable it to flourish.

In 1985, Centre College in Kentucky (enrollment: less than 1,000) had the highest alumni giving participation rate of any institution in the nation.

That small colleges are of value to students is clear. Are small colleges also valuable to the nation—serving the needs of the real world of commerce, the professions, and society at large? The answer, quite simply, is yes. From family businesses to doctors and from engineers to the highest officers of the land, graduates of small colleges succeed.

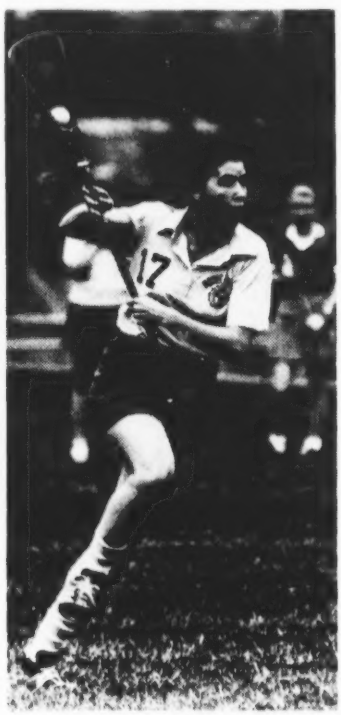
Quite obviously, small colleges serve well the nation—and their communities. In doing so for two centuries, they have survived world wars, domestic strife, economic depression, and other crises. They have survived because they are resilient, creative, and necessary instruments of society, and because people of good will—business, civic, and political leaders—have believed in their intrinsic worth.

In this context, it becomes clear that colleges that choose to remain small in size do not do so by default or accident, but by self-determination—acting consciously to preserve the advantages that go with small size. And as the advantages of smallness become more widely appreciated, the predominate rationale for smallness becomes clearer—a high quality education readily accessible to the fullest range of students.

In sum, then, people who have been innoculated with the stuff of small colleges—be they student, faculty, alumnus, administrator, donor—have about them a special zeal. Its intensity knows no bounds, its conviction is vivid and visible, and it is one reason that small independent colleges in America have survived and prospered for two centuries—and why they will for the next two centuries, too. ■

Among the nation's leading corporations, 60 percent of the CEOs attended small liberal arts colleges. Of 20 leading banks, 19 have CEOs who graduated from small liberal arts colleges.

In a 1932 poem *Build Soil*, Robert Frost wrote: "Join the United States. And join the family, but not much in between—unless a college."



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